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ABSTRACT

To determine the teaching philosophy, the academic and professional background, and the teaching methods most valued by experienced teachers of business writing and technical writing, a study was conducted that involved a search of relevant professional literature and an analysis of questionnaire responses from 24 experienced professionals. Those responding to the questionnaire included five directors of college programs, seven college teachers, and 12 writing teachers employed full time in business or industry. The results showed that, while acknowledging the benefit of a broad, liberal education, most professionals placed a higher value on pragmatic thinking, objectivity, logical thinking, and on writing free of ambiguity. They also valued a strong background in science, technology, and an understanding of the organizational methods and problems of business and industry. In addition, they valued knowledge and skill in language and composition, especially coursework in business writing and technical writing, and they valued teaching methods that worked quickly and efficiently. A supervised internship in business or industry--especially one that emphasized writing and teaching writing--was considered the most valuable kind of professional training. (Author/FL)

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WHO IS QUALIFIED TO TEACH BUSINESS WRITING AND TECHNICAL WRITING?

This paper discusses the teaching philosophy, the academic and professional background, and the teaching methods most valued by experienced teachers of business writing and technical writing. The discussions draw upon a study of relevant professional literature and upon responses from twenty-four experienced professionals: five directors of college programs, seven college teachers, and twelve writing teachers employed full-time in business or industry. While acknowledging the benefit of a broad liberal education, most professionals place high value on pragmatic thinking, objectivity, logical thinking, and on writing free of ambiguity. They also value a strong background in science, technology, and an understanding of the organizational methods and problems of business and industry. They value knowledge and skill in language and composition, especially coursework in business writing and technical writing, and they value teaching methods that will work quickly and efficiently. A supervised internship in business or industry, especially one that emphasizes writing and teaching writing, is considered the most valuable kind of professional training. The demand for writing teachers in these fields still exceeds the supply, so career opportunities should be excellent for graduates with these qualifications.

INTRODUCTION

Some of my English colleagues tell me that this is the worst of times for college English departments. They point to the decline in the number of English teaching majors, which has caused a significant drop in the demand for literature courses, and to the depressed market for Ph.Ds trained to teach literature. Offering literature under such topics as Women, Sports, Mysticism, and War, some lament, is a sign of bad times. So is competing politically

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with other academic departments to get a literature course in the college core of general studies where it can draw more students.

In other respects, though, college English is abounding with activities that draw students. Not since Army English was thrust upon colleges during World War II have departments had so many service courses. Developmental reading, vocabulary development, writing labs, freshman composition for marginal students, composition for students learning English as a foreign language, business writing, and technical writing are drawing large enrollments.

In my opinion, the increase in composition service courses is not just an invention to keep English departments alive; nor is it just a response to a public clamoring for effective writing. It also signals the birth of composition teaching in all of its roles as a viable area of study bidding for parity and scholarly recognition. Consequently, I don't believe that this movement will be swept aside by any future rise in the demand for secondary school English teachers and college literature teachers. Graduate programs in rhetoric promise to establish a sound theoretical and scholarly base for professional work in composition.

Application is also gaining more recognition. Obviously English departments are now interested in new staff who can teach business writing, technical writing, and developmental writing. The message from a recent meeting of the Association of Departments of English was very clear: applicants who show evidence of skills in these teaching areas have the best chance of finding jobs in college English departments. Tenured faculty, including those who have specialized in literature, are often required to teach these courses. Purdue University, to use one example, enrolled

almost eight thousand students in composition service courses during the fall of 1979, an increase of two thousand since 1971. To meet the demand, our chairman has made it clear that everyone, including full professors, will be expected to teach one or two of these courses each year. As this situation is repeated at Purdue and other places, it will broaden professors' experiences; hopefully it will help professors appreciate the knowledge and labor that such teaching requires. What is healthier than having full professors become working colleagues with TAs and instructors?

English graduate students and faculty members also know that they can make good salaries and large consulting fees in business and industry if they can teach others to write effective letters, reports and documents. The demand for in-house writing specialists is increasing dramatically. So are requests for consultants. One thousand dollars a session is not an uncommon fee for the knowledgeable college teacher.

In view of such rapid expansion in the job market for teachers of business writing and technical writing, I considered it useful to gather information about the kinds of qualifications these teachers have or should have. Areas I chose for inquiry are teaching philosophy, academic and professional background, and teaching methodologies.

METHOD OF INQUIRY

The search took two directions: 1) examining professional articles and research reports in business communication and technical communication, and 2) gathering information directly from experienced directors and teachers in these fields. To compile a list of experts,

I consulted the list of contributors to Teaching College Students How to Write: Training Opportunities for Document Designers, a 1979 research report,[1] and I corresponded with Professor L. W. Denton, author of a study of in-house writing in business and industry, and with Professor Lois Fowler of Carnegie-Mellon University. From names thus found and suggested, I selected forty-four experts to receive a questionnaire. Twenty-four (54%) responded: five directors of college programs, seven college teachers, and twelve writing teachers employed full-time by business or industry. The group is evenly divided between the campus and the field.

FINDINGS

Teaching Philosophy

The professional literature in business communication repeatedly confirmed a teaching philosophy that I had detected by talking to colleagues and by teaching business writing on campus. In-house writing is guided by rules established by business leaders whose main concern is making a profit. As one writer in the field said,

> Moral crusades against misuses of the semicolon cannot provide an adequate return of a company's investment in training, and the trainer whose sleep is regularly troubled by apocalyptic visions of the imminent decline of the English language is all too likely to substitute exhortation for instruction. He may be in the right war, but he has surely picked the wrong battlefield.[2]

In scientific writing, say the authors of articles, objectivity and accuracy are valued, not colorful words and artful stylistics. "Utter seriousness" must prevail; so must dedication to facts.[3]

One teacher of technical writing has made this distinction between bad and good writing: "Insofar as the reader may derive more than one meaning from a passage, technical writing is bad; insofar as he can derive only one meaning from the writing it is good."[4] In this teacher's view,

> associative thought belongs to history, literature, and the arts. Statements are linked together by connectives like then and rather, indicating chronological, spatial, or emotional relationships. Sequential thought belongs to mathematics and science. Statements are connected by words like because and therefore, revealing a tightly logical sequence.[5]

Such a view is simplistic, but other authors also argue that imaginative, personal, provocative writing--that which expresses a personal point of view and stimulates the reader to engage in associative and divergent thinking--is bad writing. One in-house aerospace writing teacher emphasizes "staying in the denotive world, using words that are not only concrete, but specific enough to accurately--and without ambiguity--deliver the message."[6]

The world of connotations is explored to some extent by business writers interested in selling and reselling, but the writer's emphasis is on ends not means. He or she wants to make the sale and keep the customer, and may use a "psychological" tact by using the personal you and by assuming a positive attitude, even in bad-news letters.

Writing in business and industry is usually up-front communication. That is, it assumes that the reader is busy, bored, or distracted, so the writer must "zero in on the message with as little fuss as possible." Therefore, corporate and scientific writers often organize their reports from general to specific, with a helpful abstract or overview at the outset.

Academic Qualifications

English and English-Related Coursework

One possible inference from the professional literature is that some employers in business and industry have stereotyped the English major, whether undergraduate or graduate. They assume that this person is really a literature graduate who may be able to read, write and speak more effectively than other majors, but who probably isn't knowledgeable about business, technology or science, and could have difficulty abiding by the rules and constraints of pragmatic prose or career-oriented English. Although this opinion exists, it is hardly fair to generalize about an entire group of graduates.

A national study of the training of writers who design and write documents supports the assumption that many English majors are weak in composition knowledge and skills, if the lack of coursework is an indication. In 1978, Michael Hogan found that two-fifths of 480 schools in the fifty states "do not require English majors to take any advanced composition courses. One fifth have no requirement for English education majors." [7]

Apparently an English major with only one course in advanced composition would fall far short of being qualified anyway. When I asked the twenty-four directors and teachers if an English major with two semesters of freshman composition and one course in advanced composition would be qualified to teach business writing or technical writing, twelve said <u>definitely not</u>, nine <u>probably not</u>, and three <u>perhaps</u>. This feedback indicates no confidence in this level of preparation.

What additional composition courses, then, do the experts suggest? Twenty in the group assigned great value to business writing and technical writing, seventeen assigned great value to expository writing, but only two expressed such confidence in creative writing.

Table I

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

Kind of Coursework	Great Value	Some Value	Very Little	No Value	No Resp.
Business writing or technical writing	20	3	1		
Expository writing	17	6	1		
Business or technology	16	3		5	
Creative writing	2	11	6	4	1
Literature	3	7	8	5	1

Respondents and authors also suggested the following English and English-related subjects: feature writing, report writing, grammar, semantics, readability theory, modern rhetorical theory, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and current research on the writing process.

Science, Technology, Business, and Other Areas

Next to coursework in business writing, technical writing, and expository writing, respondents assigned highest value to courses in business or technology. Other professionals support this emphasis. Walter concludes his research by saying that "the student who aspires to become a technical writer would do well to choose a major in science or engineering."[8] Emerson concludes that

"most often, the teacher of technical writing is a generalist in technology." [9]

What courses would a generalist take? Respondents in my survey recommended the following: computer programing, data processing, advanced mathematics, statistics, science lab courses that require writing, engineering, electronics, and the technology of printing processes.

Anyone going into scientific writing will need not only a general knowledge of science and with it a command of terminology but also a sense and a working knowledge of the ways in which scientific thinking guides writing. Professor DeBakey, Department of Surgery, Baylor University, shows her students that

> rigorous application of scientific principles at every stage in the writing of a report will control their reasoning and will foster clear, precise, logical thinking--in the circumscription of the problem, in selection and exclusion of material, in analysis of data and their conversion to tabular or graphic form, in relation of ideas, and in organization of the material for logical development of the thesis.[10]

In addition to these areas in science and technology, authors and respondents recommended coursework in logic, industrial psychology, management, interpersonal communication, graphic arts, broadcasting, organizational behavior, personnel administration, and commercial law.

Professional Qualifications

Next I sought information about sources and experiences considered most valuable in providing sound professional training. Articles and research reports claim that a supervised internship in business or industry is the most valuable kind of training experience. My respondents agreed, rating this experience at the top of a list of twelve items I submitted to them. The

next five in order of descending value are the inservice workshop, classroom observations of an experienced teacher, a book on teaching methodology in business writing or technical writing, conferences with an experienced teacher, and a supervised internship in college teaching. They rated trial and error and the teacher's manual to a student's textbook as the two lowest in that order.

Table II

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

Experience or Source	Great Value	Some Value	Very Little	No Value	No Resp.
Supervised internship in Bus or Ind	20	4			
In-service workshop	17	4	2		1
Classroom observation of exper. tchr.	10	9	1		3
A book on teaching methodology in bus writing or tech wr.	12	6	3	1	2
Conference with experienced teacher	10	8	3		3
Supervised internship in college tchg.	13	4	2	1	4
Teaching one year as college teaching asst.	11	6	2	1	4
Professional articles	10	6	3	1	4
College course in teaching methodology	9	5	4	1	5
Professional convention	4	10	5	2	3
Trial and error	5	5	5	5	4
Teacher's manual to student's textbook	1	9	9	1	4

A Broad Liberal Education

Business and industry prefer a broad liberal education for a very practical reason.

> Despite student wishes for specialization and professionalization there is no good justification for narrow concentration on the undergraduate level. The most common complaint about students trained in areas that do specialize on the undergraduate level (e.g. engineering, accounting) is that they do not have the breadth of understanding to cope with constant and changing problems. 11

Teaching Methodology

Information on highly valued teaching methods proved to be quite fugitive. The professional literature contains a few descriptions of such individual techniques as using transparencies, studying "cases" or company campaigns, using rhetorical approaches, using self-instructional materials, and requiring rewrites, but I found no articles or research reports which provided any basis for comparison or judgment. Consequently, I asked my experts to rate twenty-nine teaching methods which I had gathered from readings, discussions with colleagues, and personal experience.

The top ten in descending order of assigned value are:

1. Holding additional conferences (other than in the classroom)
2. Using handouts to show models of good and poor writing
3. Conducting class discussions
4. Using a "case" approach to simulate situations requiring writing
5. Requiring students to revise written work
6. Organizing and stimulating small-group discussions
7. Encouraging students to revise written work
8. Conducting the class as a writing workshop or lab
9. Asking students to evaluate each other's writing in small groups
10. Assigning writing for homework

The bottom ten in descending order of assigned value are:

1. Assigning and discussing readings about effective writing
2. Withholding a grade until revisions result in a student's best work
3. Teaching grammar
4. Assigning self-instructional materials (booklets, tapes, slides, kits)

5. Asking supervisors in business or industry to "grade" students' work
6. Holding conferences with individual students in the classroom
7. Role-playing
8. Using a questionnaire to discover students' interests
9. Using instructional TV
10. Requiring that all writing be done in class

(See also Table III)

CONCLUSIONS

Teachers of business writing and technical writing value pragmatism, objectivity, directness, and concreteness. In writing they seek clarity of purpose and freedom from ambiguity. In teaching they value direct contacts with students, and concrete methods and examples to guide students. Those who teach in business and industry answer to in-house motives and rules, and realize that their own writing and their students' writing must contribute to profit-making and efficiency. Logical thinking, seriousness, and sequential order guide scientific writing in particular. Teachers in both fields endorse up-front communication, which organizes from general to specific for the reader's convenience.

Prospective teachers of business writing and technical writing should have a broad liberal education and the sense to apply it in meeting change and in solving problems. The student, whether an English major or not, should take several courses in composition, especially in technical writing, business writing, and expository writing. Two majors, one in English (if it is strong in composition and linguistics) and the other in science, technology, or business, provide a very desirable academic balance. Industry seems to prefer a major in science

or technology with a strong background in composition, but a critical shortage of in-house writing teachers and trainers of writing teachers has forced industry to look seriously at English majors who have taken courses in business writing and business, and in technical writing and science or technology. Some stereotyping may require English majors to be more aggressive and more persuasive in applying for these positions in business and industry.

A supervised internship in business or industry, especially one that emphasizes writing and teaching writing, is without question the most valuable part of a student's professional training if the student plans a career in in-house teaching and writing. A successful internship of this kind could do much to remove any doubts about an English major's qualifications. A supervised internship in business writing or technical writing in a college classroom would help a student to find a teaching position in an English department. Of lesser value but no doubt helpful is experience teaching such courses as a teaching assistant.

The job prospects look very good for teachers with qualifications described in this paper. Many colleges report sharp enrollment increases in business writing and technical writing. Businesses and industries report that it is often impossible to keep up with employee demand for in-house writing courses.

The implications for college English departments seem obvious. English departments can play a significant role in

educating and training teachers for these jobs, but to do so many must, as one college writing director has said,

> pick up again, with commitment, the service concept we used to hold, the concept that an English department's first duty is to teach effective use of the language for the world's work.[12]

Table III

TEACHING METHODS

Method	Great Value	Some Value	Very Little	No Value	No Resp.
Holding additional conferences (other than in the classroom)	16	8			
Using handouts to show models of good or poor writing	14	9			1
Conducting class discussions	13	9	1		1
Using a "case" approach to simulate situations requiring writing	15	6			3
Requiring students to revise written work	16	5	1	1	1
Organizing and stimulating small-group discussions	11	10	1	1	1
Encouraging students to revise written work	15	5	2		2
Conducting the class as a writing workshop or writing lab	14	6	4		
Asking students to evaluate each other's writing in small groups	13	7	3		
Assigning writing for homework	16	3	3	1	1
Using transparencies to show models of good or poor writing	11	8	3		2
Conducting pre-writing discussions	13	6	2	1	2
Inviting outside speakers from business or industry	5	14		3	2
Teaching deductively (from generalizations to details and examples	12	6	3		3
Lecturing (with or without notes)	4	14	5		1
Teaching inductively (from details and examples to generalizations)	8	9	4	2	1
Teaching rhetorical approaches in writing	6	9	4	3	2
Teaching sentence building (including sentence combining)	7	7	8	1	1
Assigning diagnostic writing samples before instructing students	3	11	6	1	3
Assigning and discussing readings about effective writing	4	9	8	2	1
Withholding a grade until revisions result in a student's best work	4	9	2	5	4
Teaching grammar	6	6	10		2
Assigning self-instructional materials (booklets, tapes, slides, kits)	5	7	9	1	2
Asking supervisors in business or industry to "grade" students' work	3	9	8		1
Holding conferences with individual students in the classroom	7	3	10	1	3
Role playing	4	5	7	5	3
Using a questionnaire to discover students' interests	3	6	7	6	2
Using instructional TV	1	5	12	2	4
Requiring that all writing be done in class		2	8	12	2

Notes

1. Janice C. Redish and Kathryn Racette, Teaching College How to Write: Training Opportunities for Document Designers (Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research, 1979)

2. Joseph Baim, "In-House Training in Report Writing: A Collaborative Approach," ABCA Bulletin (December, 1977), 6.

3. Robert Hays, "What Is Technical Writing?" Teaching of Technical Writing (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1975), 4.

4. W. Earl Britton, "What Is Technical Writing? A Redefinition," Teaching of Technical Writing (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1975), 11.

5. Britton, 10-11.

6. F.W. Fleischhauer, "Meeting the Writing Needs of Business and Industry: an Engineering Approach," Grumman Aerospace Corporation, October, 1979. A paper sent by a respondent in this survey.

7. Redish and Racette. A study cited on pages 8 and 9 of their document.

8. John A. Walter, "Education for Technical Writers." A study sent to this writer by the Society for Technical Communication, February, 1980.

9. Frances B. Emerson, "The Teacher of Technical Writing as Industrial Consultant: Quantitative and Qualitative Problems with Technological Input," The Technical Writing Teacher (Spring, 1978), 78.

10. Lois DeBakey, "Releasing Literary Inhibitions in Scientific Reporting," The Canadian Medical Association Journal (August 24 and 31, 1968). Page 5 of a reprint sent by the author.

11. Donald P. Rogers, "Teaching Organizational Communication: Philosophy & Commitment," ABCA Bulletin (December, 1977), 2.

12. Fred H. MacIntosh, "Teaching Writing for the World's Work." Teaching of Technical Writing (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1975), 33.